

The Christian News-Letter

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Edited by
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In 1938 there was founded in Greece what has proved to be remarkably fruitful enterprise—the Christian Union of Professional Men of Greece. Starting as a small body, it drew to its ranks some of the leading scientists, doctors, professors, historians and artists in the country, and in 1946 a hundred and eighty-one members published a Declaration (referred to in the Supplement to C.N.-L. No. 290) asserting that there is no longer any real contradiction

between science and Christianity, and calling for a return to the Christian faith which offers the only way of solving the problems of the present age. The Declaration made a great impression in Greece, and was sent to many leaders of thought in other countries with a request for comments. In January, 1948, the Union's organ *Aktines* published some of the replies received. About a dozen leading British scientists and academic authorities, along with others, sent their good wishes for the movement in Greece, and their warm approval of the Declaration.

Thus encouraged, the members of the Union (who now number well over a thousand) determined on a larger venture—the writing of a substantial book, to be called

NEWS-LETTER

A FORWARD MOVE IN
GREECE

SUPPLEMENT

AN ANSWER TO KARL
BARTH

By

REINHOLD NIEBUHR

"Towards a Christian Civilization". The Theological Brotherhood known as "Zöe" and a number of other Christian bodies have co-operated with the Union in producing the book. It has now been completed, and a few copies typed in English have been sent to this country and elsewhere for comments to assist the preparation of a final draft.

We can say without hesitation that when the book is published, and if it remains in substantially the form in which it has reached us, it is likely to be of much interest to all who share the concerns of the Christian News-Letter. It is both cheering and humbling for us to realize that in this country which has been subjected to such dreadful ordeals there is a large group of men whom we can salute as kindred spirits, and who have got so much further than we have in explaining just what they are aiming at. The book is divided into two parts—General Principles (a diagnosis) and Specific Applications (concrete suggestions). Much of what is said in the first part will be found also in Maritain, Dawson, Niebuhr, Brunner and other writers. What makes this book arresting is the lucidity, incisiveness and exuberance with which it is written. Without denigrating the idea of progress, the authors face frankly the fact that their country along with much of the rest of western civilization, has lost its old foundations and must find new ones. There is a need, they say, to submit to the prevailing fatalism which regards a totalitarianism of the right or of the left as the only choice, for the conditions around them offer a superlative chance, not for an old and outmoded Christian culture to stage a come-back, but for a new and vital Christianity to offer to men a living alternative to their fatalism. It is the intention, by their book, to show men what such an alternative means in terms of belief and of social and political action.

It seems worth trying to convey to our readers some of the main lines of argument and some of the spirit of the book by the following brief summary, preserving as much of the original wording as possible:—

Part One—General Principles

Modern man is profoundly bewildered. Thirty years ago he could look out on a new technical civilization, abounding with vitality and inventiveness, with a brilliant future before it. But it has given birth to terrible wars and has been brought to the verge of ruin. Everybody has offered theories about technical society—Marxists, Christians, secular humanists and the rest, and all contain some truth, but this group of Christian men would like in particular to underline the fact that the spiritual foundation on which our technical society is now resting can be summed up in one word—negation. People have been cheated by the hope that all this tearing down of ancient customs and moralities, the mocking of spiritual values, the scoffing at belief as intellectually disreputable, was clearing the way for something new and better, and all they are left with is this gigantic negation. Negation of its very nature cannot last, for where mystery goes out of life disappointment comes in. The twentieth-century man's naïve despair, however, is not based on a conviction about the nature of reality or what the world is like, but on external and transitory impressions coming from the newspaper and the wireless, so that he is prevented from doing anything radical about his pessimism by the fact that he is occasionally jerked into a more cheerful mood by some scrap of good news.

What, the book asks, is to be done? There must be an all-out fight against this negation. However, before rushing to engage in the fight, it is legitimate to ask where this negation came from, and the answer given is that it came in part from the way in which Christianity has been practised. Of course, there have been faithless clergymen and slack lay people, but an awful fact is that a great deal of the damage has been done by men who have manifested a kind of super-Christianity with an excess of zeal which has gone hand in hand with contempt for the most elementary justice and for the fulfilment of social obligations. We look back to the first eras of Christianity and see men who knew little of Christian doctrine but were filled with Christian power;

we look around and we see Christians who know the doctrine and have no power. However, we cannot put all the blame for this on our contemporaries. Centuries ago the Church had to spend many precious years in the fight against heresy. The loss of this battle would have been the death of Christianity, but the price paid for victory was that Christianity met Greek thought at the intellectual level, and the fine and great things which ancient Greek civilization had to offer about living, about what constitutes the type of the good man, were lost from sight, and Christendom fell apart into those, on the one hand, who were prepared to renounce marriage and the cares of society and state and give themselves up to the pursuit of the Christian life, and those who shouldering the responsibilities of family and citizenship were never provided with any pattern of Christian life lived in the world. "The man who kept awake all night in Church praying at a night service could not understand the man who was kept awake by his crying baby who, for all he knew might one day become a Saint Basil."

What, the authors ask, is the result of all this? The only and only kind of Christianity which can draw men to it and offer new foundations to stand on in a shifting world is Christianity which is deeply engaged in the world—and this is just what we lack. As the negation grew stronger Christians retired into their shells, and took up an attitude to society compounded partly of a contempt of society and its ways and partly of a deep almost pathological fear of society. So time and again Christians have forfeited their chances. Why were novels so awful? Because instead of writing good ones, plenty of Christians said it was wrong to read them at all. But now we have recovered from this attitude and, thank God, we have some good art and good poetry which Christians are helping to produce, but in other spheres our recovery has plunged us into errors which are almost worse. "Our eyes are open and we rush forward and become more royalist than the King. One day we thought that a Christian should be an outright monarchist, another we say it is quite evident a Christian should belong to the

extreme left. But what we really manage to do is to put Christianity always at the end of the queue ; of any queue."

As soon as we begin talking of finding a Christianity which is an all-out fight with negation we come upon another temptation. We can actually see that the tide is turning. There are more people in the Churches, and myriads of children in the Sunday schools, and so it is easy to take comfort from small victories and to fail to ask whether Christianity is winning "the battle of the deep", the battle for the application of a living and actual Christianity, in which the Christian engages not for himself alone but "for the life and benefit and on behalf of all his fellow-men, even those who madly oppose Christianity". It is no use rejoicing over fuller churches and Sunday schools if men are not learning in them how to fight this, the critical battle.

The writers then go on to make it clear what they mean by the battle of the deep. They want no moral urges, no "return to the Christian ethic", but a return to a full-blooded Christian faith which emphasizes what the temporisers and compromisers in the Church have sold out to the secularists almost to the total defeat of Christianity, namely its *eternal* elements. For Christianity is like a tree. It is planted in Golgotha: its life is two thousand years old. Yet in every age it bears a perfectly new blossom. But those who say this meet powerful critics, who come forward "holding Freud's psycho-analysis in one hand and an old Convent book in the other" and "censure the attempt of our generation to revive the Christian way of life saying either that it is an obsolete system or, on the contrary, that it is not the Christianity of our grandfathers and therefore is not the genuine article". The truth is that the Christianity with which the critics compare these new attempts was a Christianity which tried so hard to be contemporaneous in the inner heart of its faith that it only succeeded in becoming hotch-potch compromise.

Along, therefore, with all the talk about fully committed Christian living within the framework of society must be a

new bringing forward of "the treasure of eternity", emphasizing that man's life knows no completion or perfection here below and that his destiny lies elsewhere.

The authors then go on to outline some of the changes that are needed within the Church. Theology must be turned towards the problems of modern man. For what is the use of talking about sin unless the theologian knows what sin is *in modern society*, and how can he make his theology effective if he has not learned what there is to be learned from biology, sociology and other sciences? Similarly, there is much to be done to establish a more substantial ecclesiastical justice, to purge the Church of clerical irresponsibility where it exists, to renew the age-old tradition of Christian art in modern form, to make the liturgy a vehicle of the worship of modern man. These tasks are outlined, and, of course, on some of them a beginning has long since been made, not least by the members of the Zöe brotherhood.

Part Two—Special Applications

The second half of the book is devoted to the more detailed study of the relation of Christianity to different spheres of life, to the development of human personality, physical and mental, to family life, to the place of science, art and tradition in a Christian civilization, to technics, to the law and the State, and to society in its many aspects.

At first sight the second volume looks like a detailed blue-print for a Christian society, entering into a great many questions of technical detail on which there will be two or more opinions among persons competent to judge their technical aspects, and on which Christians will certainly not agree. As such it might prevent, rather than encourage, action. That the authors are not really thinking in blue-print terms is made clear by some interesting introductory notes on what constitutes *progress*. The law of life, they say, is change. Everything is always moving on or retrogressing. But there is no progress in this process. Progress only comes about when men, imbued with certain

values and purposes, bend this process of change to their wills. This is true both of material and of moral progress, and the great swindle of our age has been that we have understood that technical progress could not proceed without ceaseless effort, while we thought that questions of value and morality would at least stay put where they were when at any effort was put into them. The Christian is committed to belief in progress, but he does not mean the same thing by it as the materialist means. He has perpetual encounter with life as it changes: he is under obligation to admit that he has been wrong, to give up some formulations and to use not only the Bible, prayer and all the regular means of Christian enlightenment but also to equip himself with what modern science can teach him. The "Special Applications" are therefore to be regarded as starting points for action, to be modified by experience.

There are some interesting contrasts. On marriage, the family and the place of women in society the outlook is very conservative. On economic and social questions it is radical. The two groups of "Applications" cannot be laid out in detail here, but each can be roughly outlined. The large section on marriage, the family and women has a strongly legalistic tinge and it will hardly strike the reader as a good example of that "contemporaneous Christianity" for which the authors are pleading. There is a categorical denial of the practice of family limitation: the Christian family should have many children and the State should bear the cost. Sex is a subject about which the authors are on edge: it produces children and therefore must be counted as good, but they see nothing in it in terms of relationship between husband and wife. The husband, according to Christianity, is the head of the family, exercising this divinely given authority as a ministry, but this is also thought by the authors to be a good *practical* idea as it will abolish disputes. Divorce in any circumstances is unthinkable—a man may be a dipsomaniac, a fiend, but there is the way of the Cross. There are some remarks about domestic help. Housemaids are for Christians undesirable: the practice disrupts two

families. Charladies are a better solution for the Christian point of view. Thousands of women, they admit, can never marry—but mercifully social service in modern society provides a womanly alternative! In short, in spite of many words of wisdom about the need for Christians to make a radical witness here in the place where modern society shows so many weaknesses and with such dire results, the reader cannot help feeling that the authors have succumbed on the one hand to the contemporary idea that a family equals one husband, one wife and children, and on the other to just that legislating for Christian athletes and moral Hercules which they deplore in past ages.

The other half of the book plunges with great courage into questions of great complexity on the Christian view of the State, its relation to Law and its powers and limitations. While they recognize that there is no one Christian view on nationalization of basic industries or on any other economic or political problem and accept the fact that Christians will disagree on them, the authors do commit themselves to a suggested sphere of State action. They enumerate four cases in which the State must have control: the fixing of wages and salaries, of prices of economic goods, the organization of social services, the defining of what is private and what is public property. Most readers in this country would regard such a sphere for the State as unduly large, even allowing for the categorical denial of materialist socialism and the strong emphasis on the supremacy of law which goes with it. Without a detailed knowledge of actual conditions in Greece, it is not easy to judge.

One suspects that as Christians in Greece, under the inspiration and infectious enthusiasm of this group, play an active part in public affairs, some of the more general remarks in the book will have more value than some of the practical proposals, and other concrete objectives will be found under the influence of experience. What remains in the mind is the high courage of the attempt being made by devoted Christians and patriots in a country so bitterly divided and so deeply suffering.

THE SUPPLEMENT

In this Supplement Professor Niebuhr takes up the argument at the point where Professor Barth had left it in his previous Supplement, No. 326.¹ Professor Barth ended with some trenchant criticism of the way in which the Bible is used by Christians in what, for the sake of convenience, may be called the "Anglo-Saxon" world. As far as we are aware, Professor Niebuhr has not before given so clear a statement on the use of the Bible as a guide to Christian living and thinking. Readers in this country will recognize, when he speaks on page 75 of Biblical faith being reduced to such concepts as "the infinite worth of the individual" or "the value of the free society", habits of mind common enough here. A problem for the Christian as he reads his Bible is how to prevent his glad recognition that the Bible does confirm at many points his belief in some of the fine traditions embodied in our culture from blinding his eyes or hardening his heart to something which the Bible might say to him which is not among the *idées reçues* of our time, and may even be in radical opposition to cherished and worthy ideals.

¹ See also C.N-L. No. 323.

Kathleen Bliss

AN ANSWER TO KARL BARTH

By REINHOLD NIEBUHR

KARL BARTH's irenic answer to my criticisms of his Amsterdam address naturally must elicit an answer in kind. He rightly suspects that it is difficult to avoid presenting the opponent in caricature. I hasten to confess that at one point my argument was subject to a misinterpretation. I suggested that the emphasis of his Amsterdam address might encourage certain tendencies in the German church to regard the church as a perpetual ark and make a home in it on Mount Ararat. I certainly did not tax Barth himself with such a tendency; for he rightly insists that he bore eloquent testimony against religious irresponsibility, particularly during the war years. He may be sure that the so-called Anglo-Saxon world is not unconscious or unappreciative of his creative relationship to the resistance movements of Europe.

In the light of this relationship it may seem completely unjustified to suggest that the temper of Barth's address at Amsterdam tends to support an attitude of irresponsibility toward the immediate and pressing decisions which Christians must make from day to day. It could be proved, nevertheless, that a theology which illumines the pinnacles of the Christian faith and nerves men to heroic action in a day of obvious crisis may, even so, be less than adequate in guiding their conscience in the prosaic tasks of every day. After all, Barth's disciples were inclined, before Nazism was revealed in its full demonic dimensions, to see little difference between it and other forms of political evil. In like manner he seems inclined to-day to regard the differences between Communism and the so-called democratic world as insignificant when viewed from the ultimate Christian stand-point. But we are men and not God, and the destiny of civilizations depends upon our decisions in the "nicely calculated less and more" of good and evil in political institutions.

CONTRASTING ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE BIBLE

Barth thinks that the real difference between the thought which he represents and the Anglo-Saxon world lies not at the point where I placed the main emphasis but at a point of minor emphasis in my criticism, namely on our contrasting attitudes towards the Bible. He thinks that the Anglo-Saxon world does not take the authority of the Bible seriously enough, spinning its theologies and theories without reference to Biblical texts and their context. We on the other hand charge the continent with Biblical literalism. Perhaps it would be profitable therefore to waive debate on the first issue and survey this second one. In doing so we must begin by admitting that it would be foolish to speak of a single "Anglo-Saxon" or a single "continental" attitude toward the Bible. Both regions are naturally filled with various contrasting and contradictory tendencies. It is nevertheless true that, very broadly considered, there is a different attitude toward the Bible. Continental thought, particularly as influenced by Barth, seeks to establish Biblical authority over the mind and conscience of the Christian with as little recourse as possible to any norms of truth or right which may come to us out of the broad sweep of a classical, European or modern cultural history. In Anglo-Saxon thought there is a greater degree of commerce between culture in general and Biblical faith.

It might be well to begin by admitting the errors to which we are led by this procedure on the Anglo-Saxon side. For these errors are obvious not only in what Europe knows as American liberalism. They are obvious, though expressed in a different way, in the characteristic Anglican thought of Britain. There is no doubt a great deal of preaching in the Anglo-Saxon world in which Biblical faith is corrupted and supplanted by the current credos of our culture. Sometimes Biblical faith is identified with bourgeois individualism, and the message of the Bible is reduced to the concept of the "infinite worth of the individual", or to confidence in the value of a "free society". Recently an appreciative layman sent me a sermon by his pastor, which was in his opinion better than the pronouncements of the World Council at Amsterdam. The pastor declared that the struggle of our age was between Christianity which believed that the state must serve the individual", and Communism which

believed that "the individual must serve the state". There is obviously no engagement between the Holy God and sinful men in such expositions of Scripture. There is neither need nor knowledge of a divine judgment or mercy. One is reminded of Thoreau upon his deathbed who, when asked whether he had "made his peace with God", declared that there had never been any alienation between himself and God. One cannot deny that much of what passes for Christianity in the western world is no more than a simple confidence that God is our ally in our fight with Communism even as he was our ally in our fight with Nazism. And isn't it nice that God is always on our side? Let us not forget to pay tribute to Barth's influence in the Anglo-Saxon world in extricating the Christian faith from the idolatries of our day.

In performing this work of Reformation Barth believes, however, that it is necessary to protect the purity of the Gospel by destroying every possible commerce or debate between the Christian faith and the philosophical and ethical disciplines. One must not enter into a debate with modern culture to prove that its analysis of the plight of man is mistaken and that its proffered redemptions are illusory. One must preach the Gospel and wait for the Holy Spirit to validate it. Neither must one relate the ethical demands of the Gospel to any ethical insights which may have come to mankind in classical or modern currents of thought. One may champion justice in the political order provided one does not appeal to "natural law" and is careful to find warrant for one's conception of justice in the Scripture. One may have even to torture Biblical texts in order to arrive at a preference for a democratic society without making any appeal to non-Biblical sources of insight.

THE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE AND THE MIND OF CHRIST

If this procedure meant that one regarded, as Luther did, the mind of Christ as the final criterion of Scripture as well as the final norm of law, one would have a creative freedom over all law, including the positive law of states, the "natural law" so dear to Catholic thought, and even Scriptural law, as concocted by Protestant literalism from various ethical injunctions embodied in the canon and representing various levels in relation

to the law of love. But it does not seem to mean this. Barth accuses us for instance of regarding the Pauline word "In Christ there is neither male nor female" (Gal. iii. 28) as more authoritative than such texts as "For the man is not of the woman but the woman of the man, neither was man created for the woman but the woman for the man" (1 Cor. xi. 8-9); or "Wives submit yourselves unto your husbands as unto the Lord for the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is head of the Church" (Eph. v. 22-23). I am informed that Barth dismissed the authority of the Pauline injunction that women must not pray in Church with their head uncovered. He regarded that injunction as "time-bound". But as far as I know he did not give a criterion for determining what is time-bound and what is timeless in these scriptural injunctions. I should certainly regard St. Paul's absolute subordination of woman to man as more obviously time-bound than the word "In Christ there is neither male nor female". It may have been influenced by the second creation story according to which God fashioned Eve from Adam's rib. It is certainly coloured also by the traditional standards, regulating the relation between men and women in every pre-technical culture. Or does the modern continental conception of Biblical authority exclude the possibility that echoes and accents of the culture of an age appear in the Scripture? If this is excluded, Biblical authority may indeed emancipate us from the prejudices of our own age but at the price of binding us to the prejudices of by-gone ages. Furthermore the Bible may thus become the instrument of, rather than the source of judgment upon, the sinful pretensions of men; in this case of the sinful pretensions of the male towards the female. Some of us remember very well how the very texts, which we are asked to take as seriously as the word "In Christ there is neither male nor female", were used by Biblical literalists to prove that women did not have the right of suffrage in the state.

Barth uses one other example of Anglo-Saxon indifference toward the Scripture. He thinks we try to solve the Jewish question without having recourse to the wisdom of Romans xi where St. Paul yearns over his own people and hopes that they might be saved". He does not say just what light these chapters shed on some of the vexatious issues of our day.

Among Biblical literalists I know there is a division of opinion between those who support Zionism on the ground that the Jewish state will hasten the culmination of the whole of human history and those who oppose it as a nationalistic corruption of the Messianic hope.

Barth himself rendered a great service to the Lutheran world in recent decades by extricating the Lutheran conscience from the grip of another Pauline text: Romans xiii. 1, "Let every soul be subject to the higher powers—the powers that be are ordained of God". No one can deny that this single text, without reference to the "consensus" of Scripture and therefore without the reservation of the many Scriptural judgments upon the pretensions and corruptions of political authority, induces an uncritical reverence towards political authority. Fortunately later Calvinism softened the authority of this single text, a service which was not performed in German Lutheranism early enough to prevent the misuse of the text for generations.

There are in short very good reasons for preferring some texts of Scripture to others and for judging them all from the standpoint of "the mind of Christ". We do that at our hazard of course; but the hazards of Biblical literalism are certainly greater.

THE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE AND THE CULTURE OF THE AGE

Sometimes the rigorous distinction between Scriptural and other moral insights leads to a roundabout discovery of certain moral insights in Scripture, without due acknowledgment of what the culture of the age has contributed to the insight. Thus Barth in the volume of his *Dogmatik*, devoted to the Biblical concept of Creation, writes pages upon pages of very excellent exegetical commentary on the simple word of Genesis, "Male and female created he them". This commentary has made Barth the champion of women's rights within the Church on the continent, though he seemed at Amsterdam at times to deny the women in the name of St. Paul what he granted them in the name of Moses. But the simple word from Genesis was the weapon with which he triumphed over the priestly minds who insisted

that only a man could be a priest in the Church because only a man could represent a male Christ. I would not wish to deny that all that Barth has found in this simple word of Genesis is actually implied there. I think it is implied. But it is also true that the Christian ages did not find it there for centuries. Why not? Perhaps there is a kind of enmity "between the priest and the woman", vividly displayed in the "Code of Manu" but operative in all religion, though overcome in the Christian faith, whenever the "love of Christ" operates to challenge every social convention and tradition which encourages pride rather than mutual respect between persons.

But the Christian Church is a religious community, subject to certain characteristically religious aberrations which stand in contradiction to the mind of Christ. The enmity of the priest toward the woman is one of them. If this theory seems speculative, the fact is certainly not speculative that it was a secular age which granted women fuller recognition as persons, and that even now the religious communities lag behind the civil communities on this standard of ethics.

When, therefore, we expound the word of Genesis "Male and female created he them" it behoves us not to take a prestidigitator's delight in pulling rabbits out of a hat which every previous exegete regarded as merely a hat. We ought rather to admit contritely that we understand the full implication of the Scriptural word, that God created both man and woman in His creation of the human person, because we are the heirs of a spiritual history, which includes a secular revolt against religion. We will continue to reject the exaggerated forms of feminism which a highly rationalistic culture breeds; even as we will continue to bear witness against all illusions and idolatries of a secular age. Yet we will admit that God "is able of these very tones to raise up children unto Abraham". It is not the first or the last time that a facet of the full truth in Christ has been clarified and restored by heresy, after being obscured by orthodoxy. There are certain insights about the political order which come to us in the same way from modern secularism, despite its libertarian or equalitarian illusions.

The illustration of the attitude of the Church toward women has been chosen as an example of contrasting attitudes toward Biblical authority in the Anglo-Saxon and in the continental world, not only because Barth chose some of his examples from this realm but also because his discussions on the subject at Amsterdam illustrated so nicely both the power and the limitations of his method.

No one has the right to speak for the "Anglo-Saxon" or any other portion of the Protestant world. Yet it is, I hope, not too presumptuous to say that there are many in the Anglo-Saxon world whose gratitude for Barth's profound interpretations of our Biblical faith will yet not beguile them into accepting his method of preserving the purity of that faith from corruption. They believe that it easily leads to two errors. One is the introduction of irrelevant detailed standards of the good, when the Christian life requires a great deal of freedom from every kind of law and tradition, including the kind which is woven together from proof-texts. The other is that it fails to provide sufficient criteria of judgment and impulses to decisive action in moments of life when an historic evil is not yet full blown and does not require some heroic witness but when it sneaks into the world upon the back of some unobtrusive error, which when fully conceived may produce a monstrous evil.

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